Études photographiques

24 | novembre 2009
Elites économiques et création photographique

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OpenEdition Journals

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3431
ISSN: 1777-5302

Publisher
Société française de photographie

Printed version
Date of publication: 9 November 2009
ISBN: 9782911961243
ISSN: 1270-9050

Electronic reference
Paul-Louis Roubert, « Funding a Photographic Elite », *Études photographiques* [Online], 24 | novembre 2009, Online since 20 May 2014, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3431

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Nineteenth-century Photographic Societies and the Financing of Photography as a Mark of Social Distinction

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1 The announcement of photography's birth was accompanied, on the part of the government and other institutions, by a utopian discourse. But it became established in France under the July Monarchy not because of its use by artists or scientists, and much less because the government subsidized its development, but rather because of the proliferation of self-employed portrait photographers of widely varying abilities and intentions. Their primitive practice employed the daguerreotype process, which embodied an early and equally primitive theory of photography as a technology for the masses, something crude, unrefined, '*sans qualités,*'[1] outside the realm of art and culture.

2 After the purchase of the daguerreotype process by the French government, commercial expansion and private initiative in general took on the development and establishment of new uses for photography. This is the backdrop for a chapter in the history of French photography that revolves around societies whose activity sought to combine the pursuit of the public good with private profit, both symbolically and financially. The management and redistribution of financial assets was seen not merely as an important part of the activity, but as the justification of the very existence of these societies.

Members of the Elite as Amateur Photographers

3 In 1851, the Société héliographique (Heliographic Society) had tried, without success, 'to fuse the contradictory models of the learned society and "the circle of friends".'[2] It had suffered from what was, to say the least, a restless period in the history of photography as well as from a politically turbulent situation; its demise, which went almost unnoticed, was caught up in the turmoil of the *coup d'état* of December 2, 1851. André Gunthert has vividly recounted the saga of the dissolution of the Société héliographique, highlighting the many contradictions of a rapidly evolving field searching for its identity amid the

competing pressures of technological advancement, industrial expansion, and cultural distinction.[3] The situation provided an opening for figures such as the wealthy pressman of Spanish descent, Baron Benoît Mathieu Raymond André de Montfort, known as Benito de Montfort, to play a role. De Montfort made rooms in his home in the rue de l'Arcade, in the heart of today's eighth arrondissement, available for meetings of the Société héliographique and for the editorial activities of its journal, *La Lumière*. Among the founding members and leaders of the Société héliographique, not only were there a number of early practitioners of the calotype process, but also many amateurs. They were attracted by this alternative approach to photography, which carried with it the promise of the cultural reinvestment of a medium that, at the time, was largely dominated by daguerreotype portraiture.

4 The effort to encourage and promote an alternative practice of photography by way of the calotype was inevitably accompanied by a certain degree of counter-revolutionary sentiment against the daguerreotype, which had quickly entered the world of the everyday, the banal. While this rebellion had a number of different goals – the defense of commercial interests, the recognition of a high-quality nonprofessional practice of photography, even dilettantism – it also united behind it a public that, while not homogeneous, was motivated by this idea; it became a rallying point for a segment of the population for whom the practice of photography had become synonymous with social distinction. Thus, a world unto itself now followed the example of Benito de Montfort and joined the camp of a 'cultivated' photography as had been opened up by the Société héliographique. Its ranks included prominent dealers in photographic equipment and materials; members of the upper middle class who had made their fortunes in business, trade, or banking; scientists; senior government officials; and aristocrats, all of whom rubbed shoulders with the artists and photographers working within this avant-garde.

5 A number of 'types' of photographers emerged from this array, and Ernest Lacan, critic and editor-in-chief of *La Lumière*, which continued publication after the dissolution of the Société héliographique, attempted to define their characteristics in the journal's pages beginning in December 1852 in the form of 'Physiological Sketches.' In this well-known series of texts, Lacan describes four different types of practitioners: 'the basic photographer, the artist-photographer, the amateur photographer, and the photographer-savant.'[4] The profile of the 'artist-photographer,' as distinct from the anonymous camera operator or 'basic photographer,' was modeled on Gustave Le Gray who, since 1851, had been teaching photography on paper and glass to an increasingly broad and distinguished audience. He is closely linked to the idea of the amateur photographer, which Lacan articulated in his article of February 1853. The profile of the 'amateur photographer' is, without a doubt, the one most determined by contemporaneous circumstances, requiring extensive modification in the 1860s, and disappearing altogether when photography expanded beyond elitist practice, the preserve of connoisseurs for whom it had functioned as a mark of social distinction based on technical mastery and good taste.

6 Despite the fact that Lacan's 'Physiological Sketches' are purely anecdotal and largely seem to be truisms today, it is worth pointing out that, at the time, he was alone in his attempt to chart this complex microcosm and to suggest a clear connection between photographic amateurism and the socioeconomic status of the photographers. While some of the very earliest amateurs may have been put off by the technical difficulties of the practice, there were others who had persevered among 'the people of leisure; those

who like easy successes and who, having reached the age at which it is difficult to learn new things, feel the need to occupy their time; and finally, those who are slaves to fashion, whether it dictate the cut of a garment, admiration for a book, or passion for a system, and who become enthusiastic about this new phenomenon, whatever it may be; [that is, all those who felt compelled to] arm themselves with a lens, shut themselves up in a laboratory, and devote themselves to photography.'[5] It had now been a number of years since the invention of the daguerreotype, but thanks to the societies, photography once again took on the quality of a 'new phenomenon, whatever it may be,' and this new type of photographer – the amateur, as distinct from both the basic and artist-photographer – could emerge.

7 Here is a man who, 'because of his love for art, has developed a passion for photography, just as he might have for painting, sculpture, or music; and who studies it in a serious, thoughtful, and intelligent manner, determined not to waste the portion of his time and money that he devotes to it; and who has succeeded in equaling, if not surpassing, those who served as his teachers.'[6] His studio is in line with this description. 'He is generally one of society's elite. He lives and finds inspiration at brilliant high-society gatherings, in the gilded halls of the most magnificent mansions, in the fragrant shade of the most verdant parks. During the day, one meets him at the Champs-Élysées, in the woods, driving a splendid team of horses, or riding a thoroughbred. In the evening, he leans on the gilt balustrade of his box at the Opéra or the Théâtre des Italiens and listens in rapture to the masterpieces of Meyerbeer or Rossini. There are among the amateurs a duke, a number of counts, viscounts, and barons, as well as diplomats, senior government officials, and magistrates.'[7]

8 The primary profile – that of an enormously wealthy man who is known to and highly regarded by artists, who is deeply dedicated to photography and has devoted to it the better part of his money and time, who distributes his beautiful prints and spends large sums on new formulas, who is always ready to encourage those whose efforts advance photography by rewarding their labors with generosity and tact – was an implicit portrait of Count Olympe Aguado. Son of the fabulously wealthy Spanish banker Gonzague Aguado de las Marismas and a close friend of the Empress Eugénie, Aguado embodied this specific category of the amateur photographer of the Second Empire.[8] The continuation of the psychological portrait of the amateur is patterned after the physician, deputy, and judge at the Tribunal de la Seine, Benjamin Delessert, the cousin of Édouard Delessert, and is then further modeled on the senator, ambassador, minister plenipotentiary, Baron Jean-Baptiste Louis Gros. These two figures complete the composite portrait of a wealthy practitioner, one laboring disinterestedly for the advancement of his art and seeking, at any expense, to turn it into a sociable pursuit. In this glowing portrait, the amateur photographer is defined as someone who stands apart from the professional but alongside the artist and who – in the absence of any official policy – is the only one capable of fostering progress and inculcating good taste in the field of photography.

A Club of Friends of Photography

9 Numerous institutional models have been postulated for the creation of the Société française de photographie (French Society of Photography, or SFP) in 1854, including the Photographic Society in England, as suggested by André Gunthert, which itself was inspired by the Geographic Society of London. But it seems likely that the founders who

made up the core of the future SFP, and who met in the summer of 1854, had also learned from the failure of the Société héliographique. They believed that the best course of action would be to put a capital resource to work for the cause of photography in order to spark 'a dynamic of technological progress with its own independent momentum' as well as to 'institutionalize photography, so that it gradually becomes accepted as a highly valued cultural practice.'[9] In addition to the model of the learned society inherited from the Société héliographique and the Photographic Society, the SFP was also informed by two other overlapping models of associations: that of the society of friends of the arts and that of the *cercle* or club on the English model. This threefold inspiration was the basis of the plan for a Société photographique européenne (European Photographic Society) devised by Félix Pigeory, director of the Revue des Beaux-Arts, and a few former members of the Société héliographique, together with industrialists and high-ranking government officials. As envisioned by its founders, this société would be devoted to 'promoting the art of photography by the acquisition of works from the studios of living artists, by the organization of a competition and an annual exhibition, by the maintenance of an active correspondence, and by a serious and compelling publicity campaign.'[10] Its goal was to use a circle of initiates to promote the art of photography in a disinterested manner and disseminate the work of amateur photographers. It was, as such, an instance of the kind of social interaction that, beginning in 1851, was able to develop under Napoleon III.

10 I will leave aside the turbulent events surrounding the birth of the SFP and the disputes that arose in the first few months of its existence. The direction that finally prevailed was the one championed by Paul Périer (son of Casimir Périer, Louis Philippe's prime minister), a ship owner in Le Havre as well as a banker, deputy, and senator, and a founding member of the SFP who later became its vice president. Périer supported a policy of mounting exhibitions to educate the public about photography. This policy of dissemination was an idea embraced by the many societies of friends of the arts which had sprung up in the wake of the Société des Amis des Arts created in 1789 by Charles de Wailly, and which flourished in Paris and, to an even greater extent, during the Second Empire, in the provinces. For the art in question – photography – this model was crucial, because it enabled the bourgeoisie to lend concrete support to artistic production. It would provide a unifying framework for the many, still scattered private initiatives being pursued in the realm of photography, including, for example, the project rebelliously undertaken by Olympe Aguado in January 1855.

11 Initially a founding member of the SFP, the count resigned from the interim committee in December 1854, along with two fellow members, Benjamin Delessert and Viscount Joseph Vigier. They did so to signal their disagreement with the emerging outlines of the SFP's policy of support for amateur photographers and artists. Aguado, Delessert, and Vigier, closely followed by Ernest Lacan and the journal *La Lumière,* felt that a genuine policy of support for artistic production would involve creating a shop – or at least establishing some means by which amateurs could sell their prints directly to the public. The following announcement on page one of *La Lumière* from January 25, 1855, under the byline of Ernest Lacan, squares perfectly with the profile of the amateur photographer published two years earlier:

12 'Count Aguado is one of those amateurs who have devoted themselves to photography with the greatest enthusiasm and success ... He not only strives to produce outstanding prints; he also endeavors to produce as many of them as possible ... In order not to harm other publications, Count Aguado has kept the price of his photographs high, which does

not prevent them from selling extremely well; this system also has another advantage: it yields a substantial return. And that is something to which this generous amateur attaches great importance. The reason is simple: Count Aguado intends to donate the entire proceeds from the sale of his prints to be offered as an incentive to that photographer who has achieved the most significant progress during the year.

13 'By offering the proceeds from the sale of his own works to the researcher who has done most to advance the art and who often finds himself hampered by the insufficiency of his means and the sacrifices required of him by his research, Count Aguado adds to the generosity of his philanthropic work a degree of refinement that can easily be appreciated by all.'[11]

14 What the SFP and Aguado disagreed on was the method by which this goal was to be achieved, not the goal itself. In the second half of the 1850s, the SFP would strive to encourage the distribution of high-quality photographs to the public and use the proceeds to foster research. The entire effort was led by figures from the Napoleonic aristocracy who had both good taste and the necessary means and whose motivation was of a selfless nature. Philanthropy, progress of the arts, and education of the public – this was the agenda of the societies of friends of the arts.

15 These societies, whose capital came directly from the dues of their members, played an important role in establishing local communities of full members, artists, subscribers, and corresponding members.[12] Dues ranged from ten francs in Marseille and fifty francs in Lyon to one hundred in Paris.[13] The critic Léon Lagrange, who in 1860 studied the workings of these sociétés, slyly advised them that if they wished to expand their power, they could do so by operating like *cercles* or clubs, creating on their premises a reading room, a conversation room, and an assembly room where their archives would be kept. This idea of the *cercle*, on the model of the English clubs, is the one that the SFP chose to adopt in addition to that of a society of friends of the arts in order to establish its reputation as a special academy of photography. In Paris, organizations also based on this model included the Cercle des Amis des Arts de Province (Provincial Circle of Friends of the Arts) as well as the famous Jockey Club founded in 1834. These *cercles* brought together, under various common interests, up to five hundred members – this was the case, for example, with the famous Cercle de la Rue de Gramont – from high-ranking government officials to bankers as well as merchants and rich businessmen. Edmond d'Alton-Shée, a peer of France and the country's ambassador to Spain, wrote of them: 'The advantages of the associations known as *cercles* are obvious: the assurance that one is interacting only with respectable men, and comfort at a reasonable price ... no players of dubious integrity as in the cafés or illicit gambling clubs.'[14]

16 Distinction was also important in the game of photography, and the ambitions of the young SFP were similar to those described by d'Alton-Shée. The SFP determined three separate categories of membership: full members [membres titulaires], corresponding members [membres correspondants], and amateur associates [associés amateurs]. The first two categories were limited to a maximum of two hundred members and the third was unlimited. One became a member by a secret vote of the SFP's current members; one also had to pay membership dues and residents of La Seine paid a supplementary entry fee.

17 The total cost of membership went well beyond the normal dues for a provincial society of friends of the arts, as evidenced by the measure adopted in January 1855 by the interim committee: 'In view of the fact that many of those who belong to the Society have

expressed the desire that the members immediately be given access to the salons, and in view of the fact that they have also deemed it necessary and requested that the annual dues and entry fee be set in such a manner as to cover all of the services the Society provides as well as whatever projects it may wish to undertake in the service of its artistic and scientific mission,'[15] the interim committee set membership dues at 80 francs and the entry fee at 40 francs for a total of 120 francs. The fees remained at this level until the end of the 1850s, during which time they were used to pay the rent on the SFP's premises on the fourth floor of 11, rue Drouot as well as the salary of its secretary, Martin Laulérie.

18 The high cost of membership strengthened the perception of the SFP as an organization for the wealthy. In the dispute between the SFP and those who supported the creation of a retail outlet where the works of amateur photographers could be sold directly to the public, Ernest Lacan expressed the latter camp's indignation, writing: 'We have refused to form part of the Society or attend its meetings ... because, like many disinterested amateurs, we feel that a photographic society should above all serve the interests of photographers by facilitating the sale of their works through the creation of a special establishment, and not limit itself to opening a club where the time is spent in conversation that doesn't teach anyone anything, and because we do not wish to have anything to do with a Society that charges a photographer 120 francs for the honor of admitting him.'[16]

Positions and Influences

19 But even more than the cost of membership, it was the société's location that determined its social position. At the end of 1854, when the SFP rushed, at the very last minute, to rent its offices in rue Drouot, it was able to do so thanks to the generosity of certain so-called 'voluntary members' who loaned it approximately two thousand francs, the equivalent of six months' rent. The choice of this particular neighborhood was no accident, for rue Drouot was located at the heart of Paris's second arrondissement, an area dominated by the financial aristocracy. It was the de luxe arrondissement, where one found fine furniture and decorative objects, gold- and silver-smiths, upholsterers, saddlers, jewelry stores, and bespoke tailors. An analysis of the census reveals a significant number of leisured individuals, government officials, and professionals as well as many wealthy people who had made their fortune in business:[17] precisely photography's new clients. With its offices in rue Drouot not far from the Louvre, the SFP was located in the center of the business district, where it was perfectly positioned to satisfy its members' desire that it 'cover all of the services the Société provides as well as whatever projects it may wish to undertake in the service of its artistic and scientific mission.'[18] In 1857, when its lease came up for renewal, the possibility of moving to a new location was raised. Jean-Baptiste Bayle-Mouillard, an attorney and counselor at the Cour de Cassation (final court of appeal), and secretary general of the Justice Ministry, suggested that, in order to save money, the société rent an office to house its administrative functions and otherwise reserve, only as needed, a hall large enough for its general assemblies, an approach that had been adopted by many other associations. The president of the SFP, the famous Victor Regnault, now took the floor, fully conscious of the role and status of the Société:

20 'The President feels that the Société française de photographie is not quite in the same situation as other societies and that it would, on the contrary, behoove it to find –

without moving too far away from the neighborhoods of the city center but at the most advantageous price and hence without raising its fees – a site that would permit it to grow instead of shrink.

21 'Its archives and collections are expanding day by day, and they are destined to become a little museum of serious interest for the history of photography itself; it would be useful to create a comprehensive library, as well as to set up a laboratory on the Société's own premises, where scientific commissions could study and test the various processes presented there. Finally, the President feels that, far from retrenching in any way, the Société should seek to become, as it were, a specialized academy that brings together all the documents of relevance to the art and all the necessary means for promoting its progress.'[19]

22 The need to maintain this status was a risk that the secessionists of 1855 had pointed out a few months earlier – of turning the SFP into a private club far removed from the realities and requirements of the very field it wished to command. This contradiction became more and more pronounced as the SFP expanded.

23 In February 1859, the mood among the members of the society was one of celebration. First, its coffers were full, thanks not only to the dues from an ever-increasing membership, but also to recent sales of prints and the appreciation of its assets (not including, as the Société's officers were fond of pointing out, the books and photographs in the library): anticipated income, advance payments of the rent, equipment and furnishings, and issues of the Bulletin, all of which amounted to a net asset value of more than fifteen thousand francs, nearly thirty percent more than the previous year.

24 This situation, however, placed the society at odds with its institutional status, as somewhere between that of a society of friends of photography, a club, and a learned society. Its treasurer put it this way before the general assembly: 'Although our society is in no way a mutual aid society, indeed while the manner in which it is organized and its scientific mission specifically forbid it from becoming one, we can – without contravening our statutes – imagine a situation in which assisting an unfortunate artist would not only be a benevolent act, but the fulfillment of a duty.'[20] The SFP thus permitted itself the luxury of creating a reserve fund, a special fund for awards and incentives, and a relief fund.

25 But in addition to these encouraging results, the year 1859 was off to an auspicious start for another reason. In response to the steps taken on the société's behalf by its president, Victor Regnault and counts de Laborde and Aguado, both members of its executive committee, the minister of state and the director of the Académie des Beaux Arts announced that the SFP would be permitted to organize its third exhibition at the Palais de l'Industrie in parallel to the Salon des Beaux Arts the following spring. Greeted as a 'victorious response' to photography's detractors the SFP membership was hence urged to produce new works that would be the pride of this new art form:[21] 'Permit me, gentlemen, to see in this fortunate turn of events new proof of the services that our Society is called upon to render to photography.'[22]

26 The analysis of the SFP's relationship to capital reveals the existence of a disparity between its stated aims and the means by which it chose to achieve them – what were the services that the Société was called upon to render and what genre of photography was intended to benefit from them? The optimism at the conclusion of 1859 seems almost naïve, for at this point we stand on the brink of a transformation of the photographic

landscape. New players were poised to take the stage: the commercial photographers who went on to take possession of the boulevards and compete for the imperial clientele. Neither the exhibitions of the SFP, which would forever remain at a lower level than the Salon des Beaux Arts, nor the relief fund would stave off bankruptcy for dozens of photographers whose artistic impulses had led them straight into financial ruin. Their numbers included Gustave Le Gray and, to a lesser extent, Nadar, who was forced to abandon his artistic ambitions and begin work as a commercial photographer.

27 In the new age of mass consumption, photography could no longer be the otium that the société's members had wished it to be. The era of photography as a mark of social distinction came to a close, and the egregium pecus, the little elite on whom Nadar would later look back when writing his memoirs in 1900, now dispersed.[23]

28 The author wishes to express his heartfelt thanks to Mr. Marc Durand of the Minutier Central des Archives Nationales (Central Registry of the National Archives) for his assistance.

NOTES

1. See Paul-Louis ROUBERT, *L'Image sans qualités. Les beaux-arts et la critique à l'épreuve de la photographie, 1839-1859* (Paris: Monum, 2006).

2. André GUNTHERT, 'Naissance de la Société française de photographie,' *L'Utopie photographique. Regard sur les collections de la Société française de photographie* (exhibition catalogue, Paris, Le Point du Jour, 2004), 16.

3. See André GUNTHERT, 'L'institution du photographique. Le roman de la Société héliographique,' *Études photographiques*, no. 12 (November 2002): 37–63.

4. Ernest LACAN, 'Le photographe. Esquisse physiologique,' *La Lumière*, no. 52 (December 18, 1852): 207. [I've borrowed the English translations of these labels from Nicholas MIRZOEFF, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 70 – The translator]

5. Ernest LACAN, 'Le photographe. Esquisse physiologique. III. Du photographe amateur,' *La Lumière*, no. 9 (February 26, 1853): 36.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. See Rodolphe RAPETTI, Hélène BOCART, Anne MCCAULEY, Michel POIVERT, and Sylvain MORAND, *Olympe Aguado (1827–1894) photographe* (Strasbourg: Musées de Strasbourg, 1997).

9. André GUNTHERT, 'Naissance de la Société française de photographie' (note 2), 15.

10. Proposal for the creation of a Société Photographique Européenne, on letterhead bearing the Society's name, August 23, 1854, Archives of the SFP.

11. Ernest LACAN, 'Encouragement accordé aux photographes par M. le Comte Aguado,' *La Lumière* , no. 4 (January 27, 1855): 13.

12. For more on this subject, see Anne MARTIN-FUGIER, *La Vie d'artiste au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Hachette Littérature, 2008), 155 ff.

13. The average daily wage of a worker in France in 1850 is generally regarded as having been two francs, although there were variations based on the kind of work involved and geographic location.

14. Count d'Alton-Shée, quoted in Adeline DAUMARD, *La Bourgeoisie parisienne de 1815 à 1848* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996), 391.
15. 'Procès verbal de la séance du comité provisoire du 10 janvier 1855,' *Bulletin de la Société française de photographie* (*BSFP*) (1855): 19.
16. Ernest LACAN, 'Correspondance,' *La Lumière*, no. 19 (May 12, 1855): 75.
17. See Adeline DAUMARD, *La Bourgeoisie parisienne de 1815 à 1848* (note 14), 205 ff.
18. 'Procès verbal de la séance du comité provisoire du 10 janvier 1855' (note 15): 19.
19. 'Assemblée générale. Procès-verbal de la séance du 19 juin 1857,' *BSFP* (1857): 203.
20. 'Assemblée générale. Procès-verbal de la séance du 18 février 1859,' *BSFP* (1859): 64.
21. Ibid., 65.
22. Ibid.
23. Félix NADAR, *Quand j'étais photographe* (Charlieu: La Bartavelle, 1993), 148.

ABSTRACTS

Historians of photography have often described the central unifying role played by the French photographic societies of the 1850s. In order to complete this picture, this essay analyzes the way in which these societies managed their financial affairs; that analysis yields new keys to understanding their position in the complex photographic landscape of the Second Empire. Like their position on the question of art, their attitude toward the management and redistribution of their financial resources reveals the contradictions of a field caught between evangelism and the desire for social distinction.

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